

of people responding to disasters through unexpected demonstrations of community, mutual aid, resilience, and joy.

The five disasters primarily framing Solnit's inquiry are the San Francisco earthquake of 1906; the massive explosion of the Mont Blanc in Halifax harbor in 1917; the Mexico City earthquake of 1985; the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City; and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Reinforced by a wide body of literature from the fields of philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history, the author chronicles the remarkable ways in which citizens banded together in the immediate aftermath of these calamities. Solnit also recalls the frequency with which authorities responded, in her view, less honorably (or at least less effectively), noting that disasters often provoke "a mixed reaction: generosity and solidarity among most of the citizens, and hostility from those who feared [the] public and sought to control it."

Furthermore, Solnit argues that depictions of disasters in both cinema and journalism advance an impression "of people so overwhelmed by fear and selfish desire to survive that their judgment, their social bonds, even their humanity are overwhelmed, and that this can happen almost instantly when things go wrong." Examples like the movies "Panic in the Streets" and "Deep Impact," along with the media's propagation of appalling exaggerations about post-Katrina conditions in the Superdome and convention center, largely make this point for her. The disaster narrative in the popular imagination often revolves around an image of the public – indeed, of the victims – as flustered, helpless, and even predatory.

But the actual responses to the disasters in Solnit's study are quite different. Through dozens of interviews with survivors, she reports on the humanity that emerges from crises. In one account, she relays how the employees descended the Twin Towers' stairs with remarkable order, stepping aside to allow others to carry the injured or disabled out of the building. In another

A Paradise Built in Hell

Rebecca Solnit

Reviewed by Robert Edgecombe

One plausible feature of paradise is human interaction based in genuine altruism, solidarity, and love, unconstrained by differences and social barriers. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit examines instances in which this particular manifestation of paradise has emerged, paradoxically and often under-reported, within situations that we generally understand to be horrific and chaotic. Throughout the book, she details accounts



example, she tells how San Francisco earthquake survivor Amelia Houlhouser established the “Mitzpah Café” in a tent, and this makeshift kitchen operated for two months as a “sanctuary and place of hopeful anticipation.” Throughout the London Blitz of 1940, the Underground became an improvised public dormitory, filled with “the courage, humor, and kindness of ordinary people,” according to one journalist. And in many more instances throughout these and other disasters, people acted not with the panicked claws of self-preservation, but as their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Indeed, Dorothy Day, who was a young girl living in San Francisco when the 1906 earthquake struck, powerfully recalled that “while the crisis lasted, people loved each other.”

Day’s reflection points to the real meaning Solnit extracts from these stories of communities in disaster. She sees these events as deep moments – as occasions in which human beings act on our innate senses of altruism, resourcefulness, and community that, for a host of societal reasons, remain relatively dormant in the day to day. “The promise of paradise,” she writes, “is already within us as a default setting.”

Solnit is at her best when she synthesizes storytelling with stout analytical underpinnings. Borrowing from the philosophy of William James, the psychology of Victor Frankl, the disaster sociology of Charles Fritz and Enrico Quarantelli, and works by other relevant thinkers, she explains that survivors of disasters have always been resilient, but the public has yet to consciously recognize this. Indeed, one of Solnit’s points is that while her observations are not in themselves novel, when packaged together they constitute a clarion call for us to reorient our understanding of how ordinary people act when the world around them is traumatized.

The author may underestimate the degree to which we are familiar with the types of stories she tells. One of the unmistakable themes in the media’s coverage of 9/11 was the way in which New Yorkers seemingly came together as never before. Stories of personal kindness and of strangers helping strangers, standing together as witnesses to horror and instruments of mutual aid, were widely reported at the time. Likewise, hospitality and rescue efforts following Hurricane Katrina, though obfuscated by sometimes sensational reports of violence and chaos, filled the airwaves and newspapers. We may remember these stories as incidental components of these defining events, but Solnit has done us the great favor of assigning them a lasting, prominent, and hopeful meaning in *A Paradise Built in Hell*.

How does this meaning – that people might experience a paradise of human interaction amidst unimaginable circumstances – inform the field of urban planning? The connection may be tenuous, but it ought to remind planners of the great social power of shared space, collective experience, and community. We do not plan disasters, but we rightly celebrate the elements of cities that nurture interaction and make Solnit’s paradise more

likely. We know of many failed utopian experiments, but we also know that they represent an abiding search for meaning and mutual aid. Solnit’s charge for us as planners is to bring these transcendent – and generally fleeting – experiences “into the everyday.”

Her prescriptions for doing so are difficult to identify, since the type of society she ultimately envisions is unclear and perhaps impractical; Solnit cites privatization, capitalism, and sometimes work itself as impediments to paradise. But we know that human beings seem instinctively drawn to the type of deep interactions that disasters, amid their horror, have rendered necessary. For all of us, especially planners, this latent love is worth remembering, and worth our best efforts to cultivate.

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